Scottish independence: Warning over student fees

The NUS is opposed to the decision to allow Scottish universities to charge students from the rest of the UK thousands of pounds in fees. Picture: Jane Barlow

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A PLAN to charge students from the remainder of the UK up to £36,000 to study in an independent Scotland must be revisited "as a matter of urgency", student unions will tell MSPs today.

Education must be based on the ability to learn not the ability to pay, regardless of where students are domiciled, the National Union of Students (NUS) and University and College Union (UCU) said.

Scottish universities disagree, insisting it would be "reasonable" to charge students from the remainder of the UK given the £9,000 a year

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charged south of the border.

But both unions and universities say the Scottish Government must provide "robust, legally defensible certainty" that its plan is viable before the independence referendum.

Holyrood's Education Committee will today hear from NUS Scotland, UCU and Universities Scotland.

In an advance submission, NUS Scotland said: "NUS Scotland opposes the principle and practice of charging any student to study, regardless of background or domicile.

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"As such, we have been continually opposed to the decision to allow Scottish universities to charge up to £9,000 fees to students from the rest of the UK in any given academic year."

Scotland has "potentially the most expensive higher education system of all the UK countries", with a four-year honours degree costing up to £36,000, it said.

NUS says Westminster's fee regime carries "much of the blame" for this, but it insisted the Scottish Government has gone further than required with "none of the safeguards seen elsewhere".

It added: "We believe that this is early evidence that we were right to be concerned with the potential impacts of the current system, but equally a clear sign that, under any future constitutional settlement, it is one which should be revisited as a matter of urgency."

UCU said: "It was unfortunate that the current rUK fee system, enabling institutions to charge up to £9,000 a year, was introduced in Scotland with little debate on alternative approaches.

"We note the legal view sought by Universities Scotland suggesting that there may be a basis for an objective justification.

"The Scottish Government should more clearly indicate its position. It cannot be left to non-government sectoral bodies alone to seek the answers to such critical questions."

Universities Scotland, which represents Scotland's higher education institutions, said: "It is reasonable to expect that rUK students should pay a fee to study in Scotland since they are expected to do so in their home jurisdictions.

"If there is a vote for independence, it is essential that prior to independence day the Scottish Government is able to give institutions robust, legally defensible certainty that a regime will be in place which enables a sustainable level of cross-border flow."

A Scottish Government spokeswoman said: "The Scottish Government enabled universities to charge students from the rest of the UK tuition fees for one key reason: the introduction of fees of up to £9,000 per year elsewhere in the UK. If we had not taken this step, available places for Scots-domiciled students could have reduced dramatically. Our priority remains to protect places for Scots-domiciled students and ensure that access to education is based on ability, rather than the ability to pay.

"The Scottish Government will ensure that clear arrangements compliant with EU requirements are in place for the higher education sector to ensure a smooth transition to independence."

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